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Greek 472
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Famously, Socrates likened the circumstances of his accusers and the charges drawn up against him to the analogy of horse-trainers. Essentially, his question was as follows: who possesses more inherent value to Athens? The spry young horses or the man who trains them? Although it sounds somewhat comical - nonsensical, even - to our ears, embedded in this inquiry by analogy is a profound (and quite heavy) question on the nature of democracy. What good is the will of the people through a collective vote if someone who does not act with honor or virtue is elected? And similarly, if the people vote to put to death a gadfly like Socrates, who suffers more in the long-term? The philosopher condemned to death, or the society that intentionally rid itself of that philosopher? This paper seeks to examine some of Classical Athens' most prominent anti-democratic literature and sentiments, Socrates' own views on democracy as can be ascertained from Plato's *Apology*, and through this, aims to investigate and ponder the questions above.

As radical and transformative as it was in terms of its impact on human history, opposition towards it has existed since the very beginning. One such counterargument to Athenian democracy lies in *The Old Oligarch*. Until recently, the consensus among many scholars was that Xenophon produced this work in the 420s BC, but today, scholars are rather unsure of who is behind its authorship. *The Old Oligarch* serves as a treatise on the constitution of Ancient Athens, and indeed, a dialogue on the nature of government and society as understood in Athens at the time. The author writes that the "poor and commons seem justly to have the advantage over the well-born and the wealthy" and that the commons are the ones "which man the fleet, and has brought the state her power" (*Old Oligarch* 1.2). In other words, not only are

the working peasantry of Athens the beating heart of Athens' navy, but they are also the people guiding Athens forward on its course as a dominant power in Greece. One reading that can reasonably be interpreted here is that the author acknowledges the merits of the people of Athens to steer the ship, so-to-speak, and their capacity for achievement. But, at the same time, just because the lower-class people of the city *can* determine Athens' course as both a political and naval power does not necessarily mean they *should*.

Having stipulated the benefits the citizenry provides the Polis, the author goes on to articulate some of the downsides to a state that is in large part people-powered. The most important caveat which he keeps returning to is that the desires of the people are not all-powerful for the whole of city affairs. The citizenry realizes there are some offices (especially those in naval and supreme command) that should be given to "men of standing" as opposed to having the commanders in question chosen by lot. The author asserts that these same men of standing, by definition, tend to be opposed to democracy.

Indeed, in this section of the treatise, the author begins to let his oligarchical leanings show more candidly. He makes a clear, somewhat absolute delineation between the "better elements" of society - meaning aristocrats and the aforementioned men of standing - versus the "worse elements," which by his own characterization are democrats and the poor. The author essentially expresses that the common people are not by definition good, and if anything, the two are probably more mutually exclusive than not. His assertions here very much take a tone of indignation at the common people's audacity to want to be the driving force behind the determination of the city, referring to adherents of this system of government as "rascals." When there are military heroes, aristocrats, and other *kaloi kagathoi* whose birthright dictates they deserve leadership more, why should the matter of which class of people gets to steer the ship of

state through peace and adversity even be a question? The author goes on to write that democrats "strengthen their own opponents" if "the rich and good citizens get treated well," effectively calling democracy into question for its potential to be self-defeating.

In addition to *The Old Oligarch,* and the well-documented skepticism of democracy held by both Socrates and Plato, several other philosophers of their era made known their criticism of the new governmental experiment in Athens. In a 1953 article for the Cambridge Historical Journal, historian A.H.M Jones explains that not only were the critics of democracy abundant among the Athenian literati, but in fact, democratic proponents were in the minority. Among scholars in Ancient Athens, "only Herodotus was a democrat," while Aristotle expressed what he thought were the pros and cons of democracy candidly, and the old philosopher Isocrates - known for writing panegyric works in his earlier years - gained a reputation for becoming "increasingly embittered with the political regime of his native city" (Jones). One of Aristotle's main critiques of democracy was the change in perception of equal rights under the law. "Back in the good old days," Aristotle contended according to Jones, that Athenians used to "reject as unjust the equality which considers the good and the bad worthy of the same rights, and chose that which honors each according to his worth" (Jones).

Socrates' main objection to democracy as both a practice and an institution comes from the fact that citizen engagement was mandatory in Athens. Because citizen participation was compulsory, especially in the legal system of Classical Athens, the process of handing down justice often proved very murky. For example, a surviving courtroom speech from the time period (Carey) tells the story of a defendant named Theomnestos brought to court on the charge of throwing away his shield in battle, and thus, relinquishing his rights as an Athenian citizen. In his defense, Theomnestos maintained that the accusation was not to be trusted, as the person

alleging that he witnessed Theomnestos' military disgrace happened to have also murdered his own father. Unfortunately for Theomnestos, this rebuttal backfired: now the man had two charges of slander against him, since accusing another person of murder in an Athenian courtroom was a crime unto itself.

What this anecdote illustrates is the innately (and remarkably from our perspective as 21st Century readers) treacherous, adversarial setup of the Athenian legal system. In a system of pure democracy - wherein the citizen body is the only entity in charge, with no representatives - the contention of Aristotle, Socrates, and other ancient philosophers opposed to democracy is that its devolution into chaos is inevitable. In the absence of a person meeting the Athenian standards of *kalos kagathos*, the will of the people seems to invariably culminate into a distortion of the very egalitarian principle on which democracy takes its root. And one must also factor in the material incentive that the jurors had in these citizen trials. Being a juror was practically its own profession in Ancient Athens, and members of the several-hundred-strong juries at trials such as Socrates' or Theomnestos' were paid. Thus, taking into account the financial incentive for an Athenian citizen to be part of a jury, combined with the inevitable herd mentality of all the jurors put together, and hefty importance placed on a defendant's prior reputation, by no means should a fair and objective verdict be expected. In a sense, given that this was the system which sought to try Socrates for allegedly corrupting the youth of Athens, he never had a chance to leave the trial having been handed any verdict other than guilty. The accusers had impossibly strong biases based on Socrates' public reputation, and the fervor they stirred up against Socrates resonated with the jurors much more than Socrates' defense and cross-examinations.

Essentially, the contrast in themes that *The Old Oligarch* keeps returning to are the contrasting natures of oligarchy and democracy, with their respective benefits and downsides.

Oligarchy, as a system, predicates itself on its exclusivity and selectivity in choosing leaders, as there tend to be very few people who can claim to be men of standing or good citizens among a populace predominantly made up of commoners. On the one hand, the fact that oligarchical systems draw from a smaller pool of possible leaders benefits the state from the standpoint that only the best and brightest are at the government's disposal. On the other hand, the problem this poses is that if the aristocracy is lacking men of the right character or temperament, or indeed men of standing at all, there is no recourse to fall back on. Conversely, democracy opens up opportunities of leadership to its entire citizen body, but at the same time, this means that both "good" and "bad" citizens have equal chances of being elected to leadership roles depending on the will of the people voting.

One can see this same contrast between Socrates and the people bringing charges against him (namely Meletus, Anytus, and Lycon). While there are serious charges being levied against Socrates, most famously that of corrupting the youth of Athens, it does not seem like there are any concrete arguments to suggest that any of the philosopher's accusers in any of the different categories enumerated in Socrates' speech are any better than him. For instance, the question of one party being wiser than the other exposes the doubtful moral superiority of the accusers over Socrates. In his defense, Socrates makes abundantly clear that he cannot claim to have engaged in sophistic teaching, or even that he is wise at all. Socrates attempts to rebut the accusation that he has been corrupting Athenian youth by bringing up the fact that he, unlike the sophists, has never charged money for his teachings or his speaking prowess. Moreover, in terms of knowledge and understanding of one's craft, Socrates explicitly places himself below the craftsmen of Athens, explaining that the technicality and honesty of their work makes them and their work inherently better than him. Indirectly, Socrates lays out the qualities that someone who

ought to play a role in leading Athens ought to have: intelligence, humility, and an acute understanding of what makes someone good. By placing himself below people like craftsmen - who, incidentally, happen to be part of the working commonfolk - he ironically aims to cement himself as a man (or at least a philosopher) of moral standing.

To a person like Socrates or the Old Oligarch, it certainly seems based on the written assertions credited to them that they would consider one of the foundational facets of democracy to be presumptuousness. In *The Old Oligarch*, the author makes note of the tactless ambition and supposed entitlement of the common folk to be an integral part of the city's self-determination. Similarly, Socrates scrutinizes his accusers, who are all several decades younger than him, and takes them to task. Indeed the age difference between Socrates and Meletus in the *Apology* partially reflects the conflict between commoners and democrats and oligarchs described in *The Old Oligarch*. The author, in essence, builds up the "men of standing" as the adults in Athenian society, whereas the commoners are the children: people that should be seen and not heard, whose main benefit to society (or the household, in this analogy) is to do the chores given to them by the adults.

An ancient scholar like Aristotle might have argued that the fundamental flaw of democracy is its definitional willingness to treat both the virtuous and the non-virtuous the same way under the law. When the law becomes an instrument of the will and sentiments of the majority in a system such as in Athens, the equality of the citizenry under the law comes to carry more legal weight than the moral distinctions of the people in question. This plays an integral role in the guilty verdict and death sentence that the jury ultimately hands Socrates. From the beginning of the trial, the conundrum in which the philosopher found himself is that he knows full well that he, at least for the most part, is in the right from a human and moral standpoint.

However, because the actions of the accusers and, consequently, the jury prove to be more founded in emotional bias centered around Socrates' reputation than strictly the letter of the law, this makes the trial of Socrates an exercise in character assassination more than anything else. The vindictive nature of the accusations brought against Socrates serve as a testament to the capacity for Athenian democrats to weaponize somewhat arbitrarily the legal system's definition of citizen equality, without taking the moral standing of the person in question into greater consideration.

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